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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the situation of special needs children who are seen as wrongly segregated due to federal, state, and local regulations, and identifies needed reforms and changes to remedy the problem. Presented from a social work perspective, the paper notes the trend toward mainstreaming of children with disabilities, children in Chapter 1 programs (low-achieving children in poor areas), and children performing at a marginal level. School social workers are urged to help parents and educators coordinate their efforts. Especially criticized are "disjointed incrementalism" (when a series of narrowly framed programs is independently developed and implemented) and "proceduralism" (when excessive resources go into determination of eligibility). Other problems documented include the lack of consistency in defining categories of children and special services needed for students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances. Integration of this "second system" into regular education is urged, with four steps: (1) summarization of the available literature to create a standard of accountability; (2) leadership by federal and state authorities in encouraging coordinated programs at all levels; (3) revisions in policies, legislation, and funding based on data from experimental programs; and (4) linking of second system programs to school reform and local school control. (Contains 22 references.) (DB)

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INTEGRATING SECOND-SYSTEM CHILDREN: ALTERNATIVES TO SEGREGATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

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Integrating Second-System Children: Alternatives to Segregation and Classification of Handicapped Children

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Abstract

In this chapter, the authors alert educators and social workers to the unfortunate situation of special-needs children who have been wrongly segregated due to federal, state, and local regulations, or because their quiet plights have gone unnoticed. The authors also outline badly needed reforms and discuss what is actually being done to remedy the problem of inappropriately segregated special-needs children.

CHAPTER 12

Integrating Second-System Children: Alternatives to Segregation and Classification of Handicapped Children

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Many children remain on the periphery of the academic and social life of the school. Either minimal or no effort is made to mainstream these children or to integrate them into the normal day routine of the regular school setting. Some have been on the sidelines merely because no one has recognized their quiet plights. Others have been segregated *de jure* because of federal, state, and local regulations and procedures that, however well-intentioned, have in practice arbitrarily divided children into categories that are scientifically indefensible and that often lead to inferior educational and social services. The purpose of this chapter is to alert social workers to this problem, to describe what is being done about it, and to suggest some roles that they can play. Other chapters in this book describe efficacious social work practice, both traditional and new. Many of these can be applied in collaboration with educators and others in integrating nonmainstream, "second system" children.

This national problem was first recognized in special education. It was most obvious not in the case of severely handicapped children, but with respect to such categories as mild mental retardation and behavioral, learning, and emotional disabilities. Instruments and procedures for classifying children were found to be expensive, time consuming, and lacking in the reliability and validity necessary for accurate and consistent diagnosis. Programs for such special children, moreover, were found to be no more efficacious than regular classroom work. In many instances, children actually received inferior services, and "pull-out" programs interrupted the continuity of their regular classroom instruction and other activities (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1988, 1989).

Research, moreover, revealed harmful side effects: Teachers, parents, and peers have stereotyped and lowered expectations of labeled children. The children often expected less of themselves for spurious psychological reasons. In addition, the shuffling of paper in federal, state, and local bureaucracies, together with the coming and going of children to and from "resource rooms" within schools, have become administrative obstacles that drain energies from the central purposes of the school—teaching and learning.

Educators, social workers, and their fellow professionals began to realize the seriousness of these problems more than a decade ago. Their concerns led to the idea of "mainstreaming" as a federal initiative. Mainstreaming did not, however, go far enough. Therefore, Madeleine Will, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, in consultation with a blue-ribbon panel, offered the "Regular Education Initiative." This initiative called upon regular and special educators and others to bring even more children back to regular classes.

Agreeing with an earlier National Academy of Sciences report, we argued that children should not be given extra-class placements for special services unless (a) they could be accurately classified; and (b) special placements demonstrated superior results (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1988, 1989). Though still controversial because this proposal calls for rigorous research and "restructuring of both regular and special education, the general idea is increasingly being accepted in the theory and practice of education. In addition to special education, the idea of bringing children back to regular classes is being extended to other groups of classified children within the neglected and ill-served "second system." Such children include those in Chapter 1 programs (low-achieving children in poor areas), those in bilingual programs, those in migrant education, as well as marginal children doing poorly or functioning at significantly less than their potential, who fall through legislative and bureaucratic cracks.

EMERGING ROLES FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers can play major roles in fostering and achieving this difficult long-term effort. They should be aware of emotional, social, and professional problems in changing institutions. They should have skills in diagnosing and removing personal and institutional barriers to change. They should be able to identify the child's emotional and social strengths and weaknesses. They should be able to provide consultation to educators, who often are more prepared to focus on cognitive development. Moreover, the role of the social worker is to reach out beyond the school walls to the family and other social institutions that must become part of such restructuring to meet the needs of underserved children. Many second-system problems, for example, are beyond the school's ken. Some children require referrals to physicians, psychologists, and social agencies for problems that schools cannot plausibly solve. Social workers can connect children to appropriate external agencies and constructively mediate between the school and external service providers. They can greatly help educators as the learning process remains a priority.

In addition, social workers help parents and educators coordinate their efforts. Many school problems originate at home, and social workers have traditionally helped solve them. However, in bringing second-system children back to regular classrooms and the mainstream of school life, social workers will also need to explain new programs and arrangements to parents and guardians and coordinate efforts to educate them in methods to support their children's academic, social, and physical efforts more effectively. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on the problems and solutions related to meeting the instructional and support needs of second-system children. This elaboration is intended to provide a knowledge base for social workers trying to play an effective role in this process.

RETHINKING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Unless major structural changes are made in the field of special education, the problems of educating children with special needs will worsen. Imagine this situation in a large elementary school: The principal has proposed that all the specialists in the building try a coordinated approach in services to children. A great deal of money and effort are going into "special" programs: One out of six teachers in the building is a specialist; most of the itinerant staff who come to the building part-time (e.g., a school psychologist, a social worker, a vision specialist, an English as a Second Language supervisor) work on special problems; a disproportionate number of the paraprofessionals, mainly teachers' aides and volunteers, also work in specialized programs. The principal re-

ports that growing numbers of children with problems are being referred to her office, possibly because the existing specialized programs have been organized into a set of "boxes" that allow many children to "fall through the cracks."

No overall system is in place for meeting the needs of these students. The learning disability (LD) program, for example, is designed to service children showing a wide "discrepancy" between "ability" and "achievement." The Chapter 1 program is designed to serve students who have a sufficient number of eligibility "points" according to an increasingly selective statewide eligibility system. The migrant education program is designed to serve only children whose parents moved recently to secure agricultural employment. The services of the school psychologist and social worker in some districts are consumed by children enrolled in special education; this may be justified if their salaries are reimbursed through that program. Seldom are there provisions for serving poorly motivated children whose achievement falls just beyond the various categorical program boundaries. Children in grief because of family problems and those suffering neglect and abuse, often associated with alcohol or drug problems in the family, are examples of such an underserved, vulnerable population.

Many schools are better coordinated than the hypothetical one described above, but many others are not; as a result, they find themselves in a losing battle with what might be termed "disjointed incrementalism" (Reynolds and Wang, 1983, p. 191). This term refers to what happens when a series of narrowly framed programs is launched one by one, each program well-justified in its own time and way, but based on the assumption that it will not interact significantly with the others. Each program may have its own eligibility, accountability, funding, and advocacy systems. The result is disjointedness that also leads to excesses of proceduralism, including the costly and scientifically questionable categorizing of students and programs.

The field of special education and closely related categorical programs now represent an extreme case of the dual problems of disjointedness and proceduralism. One researcher puts it this way:

> The amount of time and energy now devoted to preplacement and reevaluations (in special education), which are dominated by determination of eligibility, represents excessively costly and ineffective use of resources (Reschly, 1987, p. 51).

There is little research to justify present practices in categorizing children and programs in the domains considered here. Reflecting on his major review of research and practice in special education (Hobbs, 1975), the late Nicholas Hobbs said that the present classification system for exceptional children is "a major barrier to the efficient and effective delivery of

service to them and their families and thereby impeded efforts to help them'' (1980, p. 274).

The review of special education placement practices undertaken in the early 1980s by the National Academy of Science (Heller, Holtzman, and Messick, 1982) resulted in similar conclusions. Consider the following statement from the report of the distinguished panel assembled by the National Academy of Sciences:

> It is the responsibility of the placement team that labels and places a child in a special program to demonstrate that any differential label used is related to a distinctive prescription for educational practices . . . that lead to improved outcomes (p. 94).

Present practices in special education fall short of the standard recommended in that prescription. ''We can find little empirical justification for categorical labeling that discriminates mildly mentally retarded children from other children with academic difficulties'' (p. 87); ''similar instructional processes appear to be effective with EMR, learning disabled, and compensatory educational populations'' (p. 102). It is past time for special educators to hold themselves accountable to research findings of these kinds.

Our own recent research covered most areas of special education (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1987–89). Nearly seventy scholars from across the nation participated in this work. Some of the summary results follow, especially those relating to the disjointedness problem.

One sign of the problem in the structuring of present practices is the lack of consistency in defining categories of children:

> Discrepancies in state eligibility have resulted in large disparities among states in the percentages of students classified as educable mentally retarded (from 0.49 percent in Alaska to 4.14 percent in Alabama); learning disabled (from 0.83 percent in New York to 5.20 percent in Maryland); and emotionally disturbed (from 0.04 percent in Mississippi to 3.09 percent in Utah) (Morsink, Thomas, and Smith-Davis, 1987, p. 288).

''Efforts to distill practical, instructional, or programmatic guidance from research are severely hampered by . . . persistent variability in characteristics of school-identified samples of students classified under various categories of mild handicaps'' (Gerber, 1987, p. 168). A related point noted by many researchers is that:

> Decisions about special education classification are not only functions of child characteristics but also involve powerful organizational influences. Number of programs, availability of space, incentives for identification, range and kind of competing programs and services, number of professionals, and federal, state, and community pressures all affect classification decisions (Keogh, 1988, p. 237).

Services for learning disabled students showed the largest growth in recent years and now present the greatest challenge. Keogh (1988) cites Edgar and Hayden's (1984–85) finding that the number of individuals in all handicapping conditions has increased 16 percent since 1976–77, but the number of LD children increased 119 percent. It is noteworthy that the LD category, arguably the least well defined of all special education categories, should have grown so rapidly. Ysseldyke (1987) reports that "more than 80 percent of normal students could be classified as learning disabled by one or more definitions" now in use (p. 260). Even within states, the LD area presents major difficulties, as indicated in the following summary statement by Smith, Wood, and Grimes (1988):

> More than 45 percent of the students enrolled in Colorado's learning disability programs did not meet the state criteria for placement (Shepard and Smith, 1981). This result is in agreement with Algozzine and Ysseldyke's (1983) finding that 51 percent of the learning disabled students in their study did not meet placement criteria. Further, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, and McGue (1982) found no significant difference between low achievers and identified learning disabled students. . . . [These studies] suggest the lack of consistency in decisions made by special education MDTs [multi-disciplinary teams] (p. 110).

The emotional disabilities category also presents major problems. Smith et al. cite the findings from Lakin's (1983) analysis of randomly selected studies related to emotionally disturbed children published over a ten-year period up to 1978. Lakin found that "over 80 percent of the studies reviewed selected subjects by presence in setting . . . or by soliciting and accepting nominations of subjects without any attempts to substantiate, quantify, or qualify the cases of those nominations" (Lakin, 1983, pp. 130–131). Similarly, Nelson and Rutherford (1988) observed that "who is or is not labeled behavioral disordered for a given educational program or research investigation is likely to depend as much on political and subjective factors as on objective, behavioral criteria" (p. 125).

Sometimes there is a kind of hydraulic relationship across categories. A major court finding, for example, may cause a downturn in use of one category in favor of another. Reschly (1987) notes reports to Congress that indicate a decline of 300,000 in the number of students classified as mentally retarded in the period from 1976 to 1983, contrasted with an increase of 1 million for students classified as LD. Reschly (1988) also points out that the decline in numbers of students classified as mildly mentally retarded (MMR) can almost certainly be interpreted to mean "substantial changes in the population of mildly mentally retarded students, which in turn, constitute a change in the overall diagnostic construct" (p. 24).

The research syntheses make it clear that the present structure of many special programs, particularly those for mildly and moderately

handicapped children, cannot be justified. Children are not "carved by nature" into the various categories now used in the schools. There are major problems in assembling the research base as well as in the practical organization of the programs. As Gerber (1987) summarizes, "for practical purposes, there is increasingly convergent belief that these subgroups of learning problems represent a continuum of cognitive and adaptive inefficiency and ineffectiveness in classroom learning situations, and not discretely different disabilities" (p. 171). The change required may be quite radical, that is, "to cease the current classification system, which focuses on within-child categories, and to begin funding programs based on the need for resources" (Epps and Tindal, 1987, p. 242). This proposal seems less radical when one considers that Hobbs recommended it more than a decade ago.

In offering these comments about the classification of students, we do not deny that the students have serious problems; it is the flawed system for addressing those problems—how the children, and even the teachers and programs, are categorized—that is in doubt. We note that to the extent that classifications systems are unreliable and inconsistent, the accountability to children that advocacy groups so fervently demand simply goes awry.

NEEDED REFORMS

As much research shows, most segregated categorical programs are inefficient and built on false assumptions. We propose integrating categorical programs and regular education, improving the effectiveness of regular education, and reducing the tendency to classify and label children according to a largely specious system. Learning for all children will be improved when school programs are less disjointed. Research and practical experience alike point to the wisdom of reforming school programs so that most students with special learning needs are served in regular classes. Special services in restrictive environments should be reserved for that small number of students who will clearly benefit from them.

Reducing the separateness of the second system should involve careful attention to individual differences among students. We should not hesitate to reject scientifically supported programs that typecast students in ways that do not enhance their learning. The fact that a subgroup of children can be classified by characteristics such as economic disadvantage, ethnicity, disability, or even similar test scores is irrelevant for educational purposes, unless there is evidence that such a classification and segregation will lead to better instruction and improved learning.

The importance of reforming the second system is reinforced by trends indicating an increasing need for educational effectiveness. Recent demographic studies, moreover, show that more children are now at risk of entering the second system. First, there is a clear and predictable gen-

eral increase in the school-age population. From 1975 to 1985, the school-age population decreased from about 51 to 44 million, but now a reversal is under way, with expectations that the number will approximate 50 million by the year 2000. Given this general increase, the number of special-needs children will inevitably rise—an increase exacerbated by the growing numbers and percentages of children living in poverty in recent years. In 1969, 13.8 percent of children under eighteen years of age were living below the poverty level; by 1984, the proportion had increased to 21 percent. The 1981 National Survey of Children showed that 35 percent of the children in families with an annual income of less than $10,000 needed remedial reading and that 16.7 percent were slow learners or learning disabled. By contrast, 12.3 percent of the children in families with yearly incomes in the range of $20,000 to $35,000 needed remedial reading, and 7.4 percent were slow learners or learning disabled.

Thus, the demographic data and other well-known indicators clearly demonstrate that an increasing number and proportion of children coming into the schools are likely to need remedial programs and other special services. We face a general increase in numbers of children in school, an increasing proportion of them likely to have special needs, and a new and negative climate with respect to competitiveness with regular education for funds to support special programs.

Still, there is much opportunity for progress. Consider, for example: (a) the expanding number of researchers and policy leaders in various fields who have been explicit about the problems of program coordination, child classification, and placement; (b) an emerging consensus about such problems among researchers and practitioners; (c) expansion of research on subject-matter learning, particularly reading; (d) the research syntheses in regular and special education that indicate the most effective approaches and methods for learning; and (e) the leadership of major figures in federal and state offices in fostering broadly coordinated efforts for improvement that include the heads of federal Chapter 1 and special education programs.

We propose that the following tasks be undertaken to bring the second system into the school reform movement:

1. Summarize the literature on the second system and on regular education that proposes constructive improvement. Such literature should also create a standard of accountability to help professionals deal with well-documented problems and to make serious improvement efforts.
2. Encourage leadership by federal and state authorities in authorizing and supporting experimental efforts aimed at coordinating programs at all levels of schooling. Much can be done to improve the coordination of programs under existing laws and regulations, but deeper changes may require the changing of laws and regulations.

3. As data from experimental programs become available and are interpreted, consider revisions in policies, legislation, funding, teacher preparation, licensing, and other matters to improve the operations of the second system.
4. Link the second system to school reform, especially to initiatives at the local level. Second-system programs have moved beyond the control of school principals, other educational administrators, and teachers. Improvements will require establishing responsibility and accountability of teachers and school administrators for all programs.

We do not expect progress on these tasks to be made easily. Professional interests and considerable funding are involved, as are the rights of students and parents. Changes in the roles of school personnel present special challenges. Uncertainties, miscommunication, and fears abound. It is possible that major professional organizations will see more negatives than positives as changes are encouraged in these highly sensitive domains. During this process, however, we should remember the reasons the second system was developed and build upon the achievements it has attained.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that social workers will have opportunities to make this overall effort fruitful and effective. Their special insight can give other professionals a view of the child's total needs and environment. In addition to carrying out their traditional professional responsibilities, they can also assist educators in accomplishing much needed educational reforms, especially in accommodating children of the second system who are underserved within and outside of today's schools. They can be especially helpful in mediating and coordinating the efforts of educators and parents as they work toward the pressing goal of increasing the academic achievement of the nation's children, as agreed upon at the September 1989 summit conference by President George Bush and the governors of the fifty states. The collaboration of educators and social workers can go a long way toward addressing the educational crisis. We anticipate that the reforms we propose will cause spirited discussions and some controversy. But we also believe that it is time to proceed in resolving these issues—openly, responsibly, and persistently.

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